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ABSTRACT

In order to satisfy the need for low-cost child care services for the growing number of student-parents and to provide a more structured practical experience for students in its child care curriculum, Schoolcraft College created the Child Care Center as a campus laboratory in 1981. The child care curriculum, which emphasizes optimal development of the whole child, was developed out of an urgent need for trained personnel to serve as teacher-aider in special education classrooms. The role of the Child Care Center within the program is to support coursework by providing students with the opportunity to put into practice the methods they have been taught and to discover what they value and want for children. The Center provides care for a maximum of 24 children at any given hour for fees that are comparable with those of commercial day care centers in the area. By the end of its first year, the Center was able to offset its direct costs for salaries, employee fringe benefits, food, and supplies. The Center is supervised by teaching professionals and college faculty who take an active role with the children, while guiding and advising students. A typical day at the Center includes activities for the development of cognitive skills and self-concept, and rhythm and music periods. Plans for future development of the Center include renovation and expansion of the facility to accommodate 20 more children. (HB)

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WHO'S LEARNING AT THIS PRESCHOOL?

Clay M. Fechter and Dorothy B. Witten

Since Schoolcraft College opened in 1964, our student population, like that of most other community colleges, has undergone significant changes: fewer students are recent high school graduates and more of them attend college part-time (the average student is enrolled for 7.69 credit hours). Furthermore, many of the older returning students have families, full-time jobs and numerous additional obligations. Just as their age and educational needs differ from those of the more traditional 18 year old recent high school graduate, so do their needs for auxilliary services. To serve this new student population of returning adults, it is incumbent on community colleges to adjust to their different demands for service.

In an effort to satisfy the need for low-cost child care service for student-parents, and at the same time to provide a more structured practical experience for the students in its child care curriculum, Schoolcraft College created a campus laboratory Child Care Center in the fall of 1981.

In this article we will describe the Child Care Center and its function as a community resource, as well as an intergral element for the students enrolled in the child care program.

The first child care curriculum at Schoolcraft was begun in 1973 to prepare paraprofessionals to manage and operate the growing number of day care centers in the region served by our college. The curriculum was supplemented with a separate program in special education in 1976. The new curriculum, building on several courses in the older child care

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program, was intended to prepare aides and technicians to meet the burgeoning demand for special education paraprofessionals which followed the passage of Public Law 94-142, The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The two programs now have a combined enrollment of 150 students.

The characteristics and curriculum of any academic program reflect its philosophy and goals. Ths basic orientation of the child care and development program at Schoolcraft College is one which emphasizes optimum development of the whole child, social, emotional, physical, and intellectual. The program encourages an awareness of the humanness in all children.

Beginning with a course designed to help college students acquire a basic knowledge of how children grow, develop and learn, the curriculum continues with courses directed more specifically toward meeting the needs of children of various age groups; pre-school, school age, and adolescent. An important element of the entire program is a belief that the quality of experience during the early years of life is of great importance to the child's development. Children develop best when they are accepted with unconditional positive regard and helped to form a good self-image. Then need to be given repeated opportunities to explore their surroundings, be challenged, discover, and problem-solve through a variety of direct integrated experiences. They also need to be given the opportunity to make choices which can lead to independence, self-confidence, self-control, and a sense of responsibility. They blossom in an environment which considers their individual needs and interests. They need to be supervised by adults who facilitate learning, who protect each child's rights, and who sincerely enjoy children.

Initial courses in the curriculum focus on the development of the child from birth through adolescence. Other courses concentrate on group dynamics, special needs, and the actual operation and maintenance of a child care facility. Finally through the practica, students put what they have learned about themselves and about children into practice.

The child care-special education curriculum was developed because of an urgent need for trained personnel to serve as teacher-aides in special-education classrooms. Since a thorough knowledge of normal growth and development is of great importance in planning effectively for handicapped children, this program evolved very naturally from core courses in the original child development curriculum. The philosophies of the two curricula are similar in stressing the worth of the individual, and in finding and helping to stimulate the development of the potential which each child has, regardless of handicapping condition. Specialized courses focusing on developmental disabilities, behavior management, and curriculum planning round out the program. Students are prepared, through theoretical and practical experiences, to work in special-education classrooms, institutional settings, sheltered workshops, skill centers, or group homes.

The faculty in child care and special education have always recognized the role which practical experience plays in education. Consequently each student enrolled in the program is required to participate in two semesters of practica in which they attend class for one hour per week and spend another 150 hours per semester actually working with children in either a regular day care center or one of the many special education facilities located in nearby communities.

In the early years of the program, this commitment to the practical experience required that students travel between the campus and their assigned experiential site. This not only created hardship on the students, but also meant that the quality of their experience was determined by the often inconsistent character of the agency or center in which they were placed. While the majority of these placement experiences were excellent, some were less satisfactory.

The value of a laboratory to the curriculum cannot be overstated. There are many approaches to caring for children and , too often, before our own laboratory opened, students noted a confusing discrepancy between the theory and techniques taught in the program and the actual practice in some of the commercial centers where they were assigned. The purpose of the laboratory preschool is to support the coursework by putting into practice the methods which are taught, and, at the same time, provide the students with the guidance they need to discover what they value and what they want for children. As a result, students in this program have an opportunity to develop their own philosophies and teaching styles, based on sound pedogogical principles.

For eight years the college had maintained a part-time day care center in a former residence on the edge of the campus. This part-time center, for a number of reasons, was not extensively used by students, and the administration was considering its possible discontinuance when the child care faculty offered to assume the operation; attempt to make it self-supporting, and transform it into the much needed laboratory preschool.

In the spring of 1981 the Board of Trustees agreed to support a modest refurbishing project. For a cost of approximately $12,000 the 30 year old home was remodeled and redecorated. The project included closing in the back porch to create a play room, converting the garage into a staff office, and installing a chain link fence around the back yard.

Additional modifications and improvements were necessitated by Michigan's exceptionally stringent laws and regulations governing day care facilities. These included fire retardant paint throughout, improved fire retardant insulation in specified areas, and improved lighting.

These changes resulted in an attractive, safe, and congenial atmosphere for children. It was approved by the state to provide care for a maximum of 24 children at any given hour. Because most of the parents who patronized the center are students who leave their children only while they attend classes, far more than 24 families are involved. When there are available spaces, the number of children in the center is augmented by community residents who often make use of the service for the entire day or week.

Final approval, modifications and state licensing were completed too late in the summer to permit any widespread notification of the center's opening. This difficulty, combined with a very limited advertising budget resulted in a low initial enrollment. The professionals who staffed the center, however, were well trained, enthusiastic and worked exceptionally well with the pre-school children. Largely by word of mouth, flattering news of the center spread throughout the campus and the community.

From the initial, rather bleak, month, enrollment grew steadily. By the end of the first academic year, the center was able to offset all of

its direct costs: salaries, fringe benefits for employees, food and supplies. Utilities, maintenance and other indirect costs are born by college operating funds. Success overcame administrative apprehension once the costs were offset by enrollment.

The Center is supervised by teaching professionals and college faculty who take an active role with the children and are there to advise and guide students. Teachers at the center are truly involved in more than token instruction. Preschool children are part of a laboratory setting for college students who need to learn how to care for children as part of their academic program. So, while a student catches a ball bounced by a child she is also observing his motor coordination, and as she talks with him she observes his language development and social skills. The children, too, benefit. A high adult-child ratio means that a child who needs a lap to sit on will always be able to find one available. Extra adult hands mean interested help and attention are plentiful.

Fees are in line with those charged in commercial centers in the area: $1.50/hr. (maximum 5 hours); $12.50/full day (including lunch and snacks); $55.00/full week. There is an attempt to keep the hourly rate comparatively lower in order to accomodate those students who use the center as a drop-off facility for their children during classes.

Parents of children in the program have been happily supportive. Most parents appreciate the individual attention their children receive. Energy and enthusiasm on the part of students and teaching staff mean quality interaction with children.

A typical day at the center includes:

*Arrival with each child being greeted individually. Practice in self-help skills needed upon arrival (taking off coat, boots, toileting, getting drink of water, etc.)

*Settling down to self-selected activities for brief period to acclimate to the center.

*Transition - Rehabilitation of the play area by children with teacher's help.

*Cognitive, perceptual-motor and language development activities. In groups, a carefully selected balance of the following activities: stories, object naming activities, sorting, matching; size and form recognition; spatial orientation; number and counting experiences; pencil or crayon and scissor tasks; learning experiences aimed at helping children attend to auditory and visual stimuli (the teacher and the materials). Large motor and social skills activities - child motivated and teacher-prompted, preferably out of doors if weather permits.

*Self-concept activities - Name recognition, body-part recognition, "I am special."

*Snack or lunch - the group language and social interaction - self-feeding skills, sharing, passing food, pouring, using utensils, some food preparation (peeling carrots, cucumbers during "vegetable parties,"etc); conversation, depending upon developmental levels, joining in with gestural or verbal responses; specific "casual" language experiences introduced by the teacher.

*Naptime for children enrolled for the entire day.

*Creative activities - painting at the easel, fingerpaints, clay, crayons, chalk, paste, scissors, sponge painting, etc.

*Music and rhythm activities - songs, finger plays, rhythm instruments, patterned rhythmic activities, movement to music on records.

*Departure - self-help activities, getting outdoor clothes on, collecting possessions to take home, exchange of farewells, brief recall of the day's events and a quick preview of what tomorrow will bring.

Students have appreciated their learning experiences at the laboratory preschool: "Having the center here gives us a chance to put into practice what our teachers have taught us. We can see management alternatives work for our teachers and then we can put these same techniques to use."

Plans for future development of the Center, slowed only by budgetary constraints, include further renovation of the building to provide space to add 20 more children. The added space will make the operation more cost efficient and allow the introduction of a small infant and toddler program.

Limited space has also limited acceptance of handicapped children. For that reason, students enrolled in the special education curriculum are facing the same problems which students in the child development program faced before the laboratory preschool was available. These special education students must perform their required hours for the practica in community placements.

Making the center barrier-free and purchasing a few specialized pieces of equipment would allow the center to accept children with a variety of disabilities. This would meet the needs of Schoolcraft students, as well

as offer a service to parents, both in conjunction with their regular school programs and during the summer months when schools are closed and parents are without assistance.

Who's learning at this preschool? The children, college students, parents, teachers and administrators. The laboratory preschool is a vital element of the Schoolcraft College child development curriculum and provides an important service to the college and community. Future development of services for handicapped children will increase opportunities for learning.

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